he Gospel According to Sand: We Are Not Jews

In 'How and When I Stopped Being Jewish,' author and professor Shlomo Sand argues that there is no such thing as a secular Jew.

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May 19, 2013

Professor Shlomo Sand opens his new book, "How and When I Stopped Being Jewish," with a warning. “Many readers will see the main point presented in this book as illegitimate and even infuriating. Many of the secular people among them who insist on defining

themselves as Jews will reject it out of hand. Others will see me as a vile, self-hating traitor."

Sand, a 66-year-old history professor at Tel Aviv University, does not seem to suffer from lack of self-confidence, nor does he have any difficulty expressing himself. On the contrary, the thousands of students packing the lecture halls to hear him speak over last three decades attest to his uncanny ability to distill controversial assertions into supremely fluent language.

Why, then, would this well-known, veteran professor feel compelled to open his new book with such a warning? Perhaps he has learned from experience, having authored the two previous books in the series, "The Invention of the Jewish People" (published in English by Verso Books, 2009) and "The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland" (Verso Books, 2012). Both generated a great deal of controversy, some particularly harsh, within academia and among the general public as well.

“I suffer from people who don’t understand me — in class or in a press interview. But that’s very normal. I take into account that some people won’t understand me,” Sand says. “It’s not always easy for me to write for every person. I can’t write like [politician and journalist] Yair Lapid, but I try to be accessible.”

In the two preceding books, Sand claims that the notion of a unified Jewish people was invented, based on myths and fictional accounts, in order to further Zionist ideals. And it is this faulty logic, he says, that served as the excuse for the establishment of the State of Israel. Now, in "How and When I Stopped Being Jewish" (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan), Sand takes secular readers a step further, asserting that if there is no such thing as a Jewish people, then secular individuals cannot, by definition, be Jewish. Step by step, he undermines, weakens and deconstructs the identity of secular Jews.

“People tell me I belong to the nation of Albert Einstein, but I — Shlomo Sand — feel closer to the Israeli culture of Arik Sharon than to the German culture of Einstein,” he says. In other words, Sand does

not identify with a Jewish nation, but rather with an Israeli one. “Ask me if I like it — not particularly, but I accept it as reality,” he says.

Marx, Freud and Einstein: Good for the Jews?

In "How and When I Stopped Being Jewish," Sand asks whether there exists a secular Jewish culture that unites non-observant Jews throughout the world. He attempts, uncomfortably, to clarify whether there is a “Jewish component” that connects the philosophies of famous secular Jews such as Marx, Freud and Einstein.

“Did 'Das Kapital,' the theory of the unconscious and the theory of relativity contribute in any way to the shaping and preservation of secular Jewish culture?” he asks. In Sand's view, the answer is no.

“Is Arthur Koestler, bold and provocative as he is, a Jewish writer? Did Serge Gainsbourg, of whom I’m a long-time admirer, write and sing Jewish songs rather than French ones, and no one ever knew it?” he asks sarcastically.

Sand even tries to take humor away from the Jews, asserting that figures such as Sholem Aleichem and Woody Allen, for example, drew on “Slavic-Yiddish humor” – a culture that, according to Sand, died out long ago. Though certain veins of humor mistakenly labeled as “Jewish” do indeed arouse strong feelings of nostalgia among many Diaspora Jews, Sand points out that these types of humor were never viewed as particularly funny by Jewish writers in Iraq, whose humor, he argues, is based on a different sort of logic.

If this is true, then what forms the basis for secular Jews' Judaism? What connects secular Jews from Tel Aviv with non-believing Jews from Paris or New York? In Sand’s opinion, there is no connection.

“Those who are called ‘secular Jews’ don’t have a way of life in common. They don’t experience day-to-day pain and joy that connect them to other secular Jews throughout the world," he says. "They speak, weep, make their living and create in their own languages and national cultures.”

So what's left? If secular Jews share no mutual religion, no culture, no way of life, what can explain their inclusion in an exclusive nation? A few Jewish holidays and ceremonies? Sand seeks to undermine even that much. “Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century, celebrated Hanukkah with a Christmas tree and did not circumcise his son," he points out. "On the basis of those practices, can he be considered a Jew or a Christian?”

A Jewish state incapable of defining Judaism

Sand’s book is disturbing, challenging, annoying, yes, and thought-provoking. “The deeper we delve into the subject, the more we have to admit that there is no unifying Jewish culture that is not religious,” he tells Haaretz. “You and I have a day-to-day experience and existence that are very much Israeli. They may have Jewish and Yiddish sources, but they’re Israeli.”

Today, this confusion in defining a "Jewish people" manifests as confusion in justifying a Jewish state, Sand asserts, presenting what he sees as the "cardinal claim" of the State of Israel: “It defines itself as

a Jewish state, or as the state of the Jewish people across the world, but is not capable of defining who is a Jew."

"No linguistic or cultural criterion can contribute to the definition of who is a Jew, since the descendants of Jews never had a language or secular culture in common," he says. This explains why, in Sand's view, Israeli legislators could fall back only on religious criteria in determining what constitutes Jewish identity: those born to Jewish mothers or who undergo an authorized conversion process.

Yet one need not go to any great lengths to find the inherent contradictions in this definition, as Sand deftly points out. "The state of the Jews isn't all that Jewish. Being a Jew in the State of Israel doesn't mean you have to observe all the commandments and believe in the Jewish God. You can explore Buddhist beliefs, as Ben-Gurion did, or eat shrimp, as Arik Sharon did. You don't have to cover your head — most of Israel's leaders and army generals don't cover theirs."

One of the major problems that arises from this confused definition, according to Sand, is the inherent discrimination shown by the Jewish

state to Arabs living within its borders. “Being a Jew in Israel means, first and foremost, not being an Arab,” he writes, comparing the elevated status of Jews in Israel to that of whites in the American south through the 1960s, French settlers in Algeria before 1962, and white and Afrikaner residents of South Africa before 1994.

At the end of this list, Sand adds, with some reservation, Nazi Germany as well. “Maybe soon [the status of the Jewish Israeli] will also appear similar to the status of the Aryan in Germany of the 1930s,” he writes. In parentheses he adds, “I absolutely refuse to consider any sort of comparison to Germany in the 1940s.”

Why did you include the Nazis in that list?

“I hesitated when I wrote that, but I don’t want to be careful with the Israelis. I can’t treat Israelis with kid gloves in the early 21st century.”

What do you mean when you compare the State of Israel to Nazi Germany?

“I make a distinction between the 1930s and the 1940s. In the 1930s, they excluded the Jews, but they allowed them to leave. In the 1940s, they killed the Jews. There’s a significant difference. But the fact that the mayor of Upper Nazareth has kept his job even after stating, in 2013, that Arabs were not wanted there, this begins to remind me of the exclusion of the Jews. There is no historical comparison, however, between Zionism and Nazism. In no way whatsoever do I say that it will end in annihilation.”

The Holocaust is not absent from Sand's book, however. In fact, according to "How and When I Stopped Being Jewish," the Holocaust has become an important aspect of secular Jewish identity.

“The symbolic capital derived from the suffering of the past is supposed to be passed down in ink like any other capital,” Sand writes. “The Holocaust industry sought to maximize the suffering of the past and derive from it as much political and even financial capital as possible.”

“Instead of the old religious identity of the ‘chosen people,’ what arose was an extremely beneficial modern secular ritual of not only ‘the chosen victim’ but also ‘the exclusive victim.’” That same "chosen victim" became an "exclusive" one when he methodically began to ignore the other victims of the Holocaust, Sand asserts, until eventually “the genocide received Jewish exclusivity.”

“Since the last quarter of the 20th century, almost all other victims of the Holocaust whom the Nazis did not mark as ‘Semitic’ have vanished,” he writes. “From then on, all comparison with other acts of genocide was forbidden. ... Any crime of the past or the present necessarily paled next to the great massacre of the Jews during World War II.”

Thus it is Hitler who has proved the victor of World War II, Sand claims. “Although he was defeated militarily and politically, only some years later the core of his perverted ideology seeped once more to the surface, and today it is alive, kicking and menacing.”

Sand is not referring here to anti-Semitism but to the way he says many Jews use racist doctrine to their advantage. "The perception of the Jews as a nation and a race whose traditional characteristics are passed down through heredity in some invisible way is still very much alive. Yesterday it was simple physical characteristics such as blood or facial structure. Today it's DNA," he writes. "Hitler's desire to remove the Jews from 'normal' humanity was fulfilled in a perverted way by the politics of memory adopted by Israel and its followers in the Western world."